

Phoenix: To Get Their Man Dead or Alive

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee may have been confused by last week's testimony on Operation Phoenix. The committee had a report from the American military command in Saigon that seemed to give Phoenix the credit for hunting down and killing 6,187 Vietcong political cadres last year. Then it heard William E. Colby, the pacification chief in Vietnam, emphatically deny that Phoenix was an "assassination" program.

The problem is one of definition, according to knowledgeable sources. Phoenix, which operates at the district and province level, gathers, evaluates and disseminates intelligence on the identity and movements of members of the Vietcong infrastructure. These are the nonmilitary figures who govern the parts of Vietnam still controlled by their movement and who slip in and out of Government-controlled and contested areas.

Shadowy Organizations

The information that may lead to the "neutralization" of these men — the official figures state that in addition to those killed, 8,505 were captured and 4,382 persuaded to defect in 1969 — is then passed on to Vietnamese officials who can call any one of several shadowy specialist organizations for action.

These include Provincial Reconnaissance Units, Armed Propaganda Teams, Kit Carson Scouts and Seal commando teams. Operating in small units, generally of six to 12 men, they quietly penetrate into contested or Vietcong-controlled territory to carry out their missions. And despite whatever denials that are being made now in Washington and Saigon, their mission is to get their man, dead or alive.

In such operations, a prisoner, who can sometimes be made to yield information under torture, is more valuable than a corpse; but there are occasions that I heard about during my time in Vietnam — for example, the

bush of a Vietcong district headquarters staff as it is moving from one hamlet to another — when the execution team must hit and run.

Dirty Job

It is a dirty and dangerous occupation. Squads that do their work conscientiously take many casualties. Entire units have been wiped out in counter-ambushes, carefully prepared with false information. The men who volunteer for such assignments often have unsavory pasts. The lure is usually money. The pay scale for Provincial Reconnaissance Units is four times as high as that of the Vietnamese military. Bonuses are given for spectacular successes. P.R.U. men tend to have more gold teeth than the average Vietnamese, bigger motorbikes and sharper clothes. The Kit Carson Scouts and the Armed Propaganda Teams are composed of Vietcong defectors and captives, and there are many of these in the Seal teams, which are run by the United States Navy. For them, poor performance can mean a return to harsh confinement. Any hint of treachery can bring summary execution.

The apparent disquiet with which various Senators have viewed Phoenix operations — there is apparently a suspicion that they have been occasionally directed against anyone who opposes the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu — has led the Pentagon and the Saigon command to do something unusual. Correspondents have been told that the program hasn't been working well and that its tally sheet for 1969 is probably grossly inflated. Moreover, American participation — intelligence officers are assigned as advisers and paymasters in each district and province headquarters — is being gradually reduced with the objective of eventual Vietnamization.

Operation Phoenix was established in July, 1967, by Robert Komer, Mr. Colby's predecessor as pacification chief, and, like him, a senior official of the Central Intelligence Agency before taking that post. It was Mr. Komer's view that a military victory, which was still an objective in those days, would be meaningless, even if attainable, unless the Vietcong's political structure could be destroyed. Mr. Komer also hoped to hit back at the Vietcong assassination squads which for years had been carrying out the judgments in absentia of revolutionary courts against government functionaries.

Its very existence was classified as "secret" and Phoenix was staffed by tough close-mouthed C.I.A. operators who worked behind unmarked doors in provincial and district headquarters, raced about the countryside in Scout station-wagons and, inconspicuously, carried attaché cases. I saw one of the cases opened once; it contained a stubby Beretta submachine gun and packs and packs of Vietnamese 500-plaster notes.

By late 1967 it wasn't hard to find knowledgeable sources who would admit that Phoenix wasn't accounting for many Vietcong leaders and that the P.R.U.'s, who were also recruited by the C.I.A., were quicker to take their money, get drunk and go off on their own extortion and robbery operations than they were to sweep out into the dangerous boondocks. Besides, many Vietnamese province and district officials were unwilling, as they still seem to be, to upset live-and-let-live arrangements with the Vietcong that might put their own lives in jeopardy.

Tet Setback

The Tet offensive of 1968 set back Phoenix operations for many months. Later, a Washington decision to reduce the C.I.A.'s operational role in Vietnam led to the replacement of agency men by young military intelligence officers, often straight out of school. Last July the military command took nominal charge of the program, although the planning is still done by the Office of the Special Assistant to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, the somewhat moth-eaten cover for C.I.A. headquarters in Saigon.

That Operation Phoenix has not been able to eliminate the Vietcong political structure can hardly be regarded as surprising. After 30 years of covert operations against Japanese, Chinese, French, American and South Vietnamese security forces, Vietcong officials have become masters of survival, never sleeping more than one night in the same place, masking their identity behind dozens of aliases, seldom letting their guard down. More important, after all this time, they can still find Vietnamese who will shelter rather than betray them.

—TOM BUCKLEY